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Being or Nothingness

Indigeneity, Antiblackness, and Settler Colonial Critique

IYKO DAY

This special issue's focus on comparative racial scholarship gives me an opportunity to weigh in on the specific interplay of race and settler colonialism within an expanding sphere of American studies, one that intersects with and broadens the long-standing critical terrain of Indigenous studies in North America. I am particularly interested in exploring the connection between settler colonial studies and black studies, especially in relation to binary formulations of colonial and racial formation. This is expressed either as an Indigenous/settler binary constituted in relation to land or a black/nonblack binary founded on racial slavery. These approaches are at times deeply skeptical of relational or comparative analyses of race and reject any coalitional premise that unifies people of color generally. On this count, Jared Sexton argues that a form of "people-of-color-blindness" is embedded in the relational concept of "people of color," one that fundamentally misunderstands "the specificity of antiblackness and presumes or insists upon the monolithic character of victimization under white supremacy."¹ Acknowledging these points, I focus on the exceptionalism produced by these binary frameworks, whereby both the Native and the black body signify a genocidal limit concept. For instance, Patrick Wolfe casts settler colonialism as a zero-sum game that requires "the elimination of Native alternatives" and results in the "social death of Nativeness."² Alternatively, writing from the perspective of Afro-pessimism, Frank B. Wilderson III writes, "from the very beginning, we [black people] were meant to be accumulated and die."³ Extending an Afro-pessimist critique to the field of settler colonial American studies, moreover, Sexton argues that settler colonial decolonization movements for Indigenous sovereignty embrace a Negrophobic discourse of "post-racialism by diminishing or denying the significance of race in thinking about the relative structural positions of black and non-black populations."⁴ To be clear, my intentions in this article are not to engage in an evaluation of who

the greater victim is—even if this kind of evaluation is precisely the objective of the scholarship under discussion. Rather, it is to probe the discursive construction of colonial and racial exceptionalism itself, particularly in terms of their relation to a privileged conception of labor within Karl Marx's theory of primitive accumulation. For it is within these chapters of *Capital, Volume I* that Marx connects enslavement and colonial genocide under a broader logic of capitalist accumulation through the violent expropriation of land and labor. Guiding this inquiry is a larger motivating question about whether settler colonial critique has an immanent capacity to examine race.

Before I proceed, I want to acknowledge that the intersection of Indigeneity and antiblackness in the continental United States presents a unique set of issues, insofar as Occupied Palestine and Hawai'i have emerged as equally if not more prominent than the continental United States as sites for theorizing the eliminatory logics of settler colonialism.⁵ Part of this centrifugal dynamic may be attributed to the fact that unlike other white settler colonies like Canada, where colonial dispossession is the paradigmatic signifier of white settler supremacy, in the continental United States it has been the legacy of slavery and antiblack racism. This is certainly not to say that the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples in the United States goes completely unacknowledged but rather to appreciate the fact that alongside recent Indigenous sovereignty movements such as Idle No More in Canada or the BDS movement in Occupied Palestine, it has been Ferguson in the United States. Thus, the centrifugal or long-distance lens that I associate with settler colonial *American* studies is clearly a reflection of the continued tensions around theorizing the intersection of race and Indigeneity. Together with what Saidiya Hartman calls the "afterlife of slavery," the logic of antiblackness complicates a settler colonial binary framed around a central Indigenous/settler opposition.⁶ Understandably, there is conceptual difficulty in folding the experience of racial capture and enslavement into the subject position of the "settler."

But if we move outside the continental United States, questions raised by such binaries dissipate in the face of the starkest and most brutal binary colonial formations. Occupied Palestine, a comparatively recent site of settler colonialism, is such a place, powerfully magnifying the struggle between settler and Indigenous populations in ways that recall the frontier violence of nineteenth-century America. The illegal occupation, siege of Gaza, and ongoing construction of residential settlements on the West Bank is an uncanny corollary to the lead up to the 1830 Indian Removal Act, which relocated tens of thousands of peoples from the Southeastern Nations east

of the Mississippi River. From this view, the glaring binarism of Occupied Palestine offers a window onto U.S. history. But it is for the same reason that Bill V. Mullen's description of Occupied Palestine as "the most dialectical place on Earth" is unable to capture the racial heterogeneity of the continental United States in the present tense.⁷ Further, in the case of Hawai'i, another relatively recent site of settler colonialism, Asian Americans have replaced original white settlers and transformed and extended those eliminatory logics into a formation of Asian settler colonialism that is also reflective of the Indigenous/settler binary.⁸ As Dean Saranillio explains, "While migration in and of itself does not equate to colonialism, migration to a settler colonial space, where Native lands and resources are under political, ecological, and spiritual contestation, means the political agency of immigrant communities can bolster a colonial system initiated by White settlers."⁹ The lesson that Hawai'i offers is one in which a formerly exploited migrant population has achieved structural dominance. Although white settlers exploited indentured Asian laborers in the 1890s as part of the process of dispossessing Native Hawaiians of their land, Asian American invocations of "local" identity and rejection of Native Hawaiian claims for sovereignty reproduce the logics of colonial dispossession. Here Patrick Wolfe's clarification that settler colonialism is a "structure not an event" is especially salient.¹⁰

In comparison to Canada or Australia, what I would describe as a certain attenuation in identifying the continental United States as a settler colony may also be attributed to an ideology of American exceptionalism and history of empire building, which are possibly the most exemplary expressions of settler colonialism. Indeed, what distinguishes the United States as a settler colony is the way it epitomizes a paradigm of endless invasion of both Indigenous *and* foreign lands.¹¹ Unlike former franchise colonies, such as British India or the Dutch East Indies—regions where economic exploitation occurred *without* large-scale white settlement—settler colonies are also largely immune to decolonization because settlers don't leave. They are "breakaway" colonies insofar as they transfer the power of the metropolitan center to the periphery, *subverting* a normative logic of colonialism.¹² In establishing British settler colonies, it was specifically land acquisition that was the primary objective rather than the exploitation of Indigenous labor.¹³ Because white settlement was a primary goal in British North America, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, the process of detaching from British imperial rule—becoming "postcolonial" as it were—did not structurally alter the colonial relationship between settlers and Indigenous populations. In other words, there is no "post" to settler colonialism. As Werner

Biermann and Reinhart Kössler reflect on the irony of revolutionary settler independence movements like those in the United States, “settler counter-imperialism cannot, in any sense, be considered of an emancipatory nature, but rather as a defense for atavistic forms of exploitation which by this token take on a politically anachronistic stature as well.”¹⁴ Therefore, in settler colonies, the diminishing role of an imperial metropole actually facilitated successive stages of Indigenous elimination that involved invasion, removal, relocation, reservation, termination, and assimilation. This renders a paradoxical situation where, as Robert J. C. Young describes it, “the postcolonial operates simultaneously as the colonial.”¹⁵

THE TWO STATES OF SETTLER COLONIALISM

In a nation with such fraught contexts of forced migration, immigrant exclusion, relocation, and deportation, questions inevitably arise over whether non-Indigenous but racialized peoples—such as slaves, refugees, or the undocumented—are unequivocally “settlers.” The responses to this question have been varied. On the one hand, Lorenzo Veracini has distinguished migrants from settlers, claiming that “migrants, by definition, move to *another* country and lead diasporic lives, settlers on the contrary, move . . . to *their* country.”¹⁶ The crucial distinction that Veracini draws turns on the question of sovereignty: settlers bring their sovereignty with them, and migrants do not. Jodi A. Byrd extends this kind of distinction by offering the term *arrivant* to “signify those people forced into the Americas through the violence of European and Anglo-American colonialism and imperialism around the globe.”¹⁷ Patrick Wolfe, on the other hand, registers unwavering opposition to any view that suggests that a lack of embodied sovereignty—or any other condition of migration—has any bearing on what he casts as an inexorable logic “whereby settler societies, for all their internal complexities, uniformly require the elimination of Native alternatives.”¹⁸ He further charges that any “post-structuralist indictment of binarism endorses colonial policy-making” because it implies that the “originary binarism has become dissolved or transcended.”¹⁹ Below I look more closely at Wolfe’s argument and its implications for framing race and Indigeneity before turning to Afro-pessimist arguments regarding an essential black/nonblack binary.

Taking each of Wolfe’s points in turn, my primary objective is to show how he both evacuates race and projects voluntarism into his characterization of the settler. Directing his comments primarily at U.S. academics, Wolfe’s argument rests on two main points that (1) reject the relevance of

migrant voluntarism as a constitutive feature of the settler and (2) decouple race from settler colonialism.²⁰ First, he argues that it is a mistake to define the settler according to a criterion of voluntarism because the opposition between the Native and the settler is “a structural relationship rather than an effect of the will.”²¹ This framework applies to enslaved people too:

The fact that enslaved people *immigrated* against their will—to cite the most compelling case for voluntarism—does not alter the structural fact that their presence, however involuntary, was part of the process of Native dispossession. White convicts [in Australia] also came against their will. Does this mean their descendants are not settlers?²²

While his claim that being a settler is “not an effect of the will” has merit, he implicitly preserves the voluntarism that he otherwise rejects in his construction of the slave. In particular, he draws on the Australian context in which white convict labor was imported from Britain in order to pose the rhetorical question: “does this mean their descendants are not settlers?” Given that Wolfe concedes that white convicts in Australia did not pass the condition of their criminal enslavement onto their offspring, it is surprising that he presents it as a comparative equivalent to a U.S. history of African slavery. The very content of black racialization has been based on the exclusive and transferable condition of racial enslavement. Furthermore, his repeated usage of “immigrants” projects into every migrant a set of voluntaristic assumptions and functions as a problematic stand-in for widely divergent conditions of voluntary and forced migration that are central features of the United States’ specific configuration as a settler colony. Former slaves, war refugees, and undocumented migrants are no more “immigrants” than Indigenous peoples. More pointedly, from the standpoint of Afro-pessimism, Jared Sexton states, “No amount of tortured logic could permit the analogy to be drawn between a former slave population and an immigrant population, no matter how low-flung the latter group.”²³ Wolfe’s blanket usage of “immigration” also papers over a long history of racialized immigrant restriction, which barred or restricted the flow of Asian migrants from the late nineteenth century until 1965. And for those Asian migrants who remained “aliens ineligible for citizenship” until the mid-twentieth century or the Japanese civilians who were relocated as “enemy aliens” during World War II, immigrant status was inordinately conditioned by race. In the contemporary context, racialized vulnerability to deportation of undocumented, guest-worker, or other provisional migrant populations similarly

exceed the conceptual boundaries that attend “the immigrant.” The fact that I am pointing this out doesn’t absolve any of these groups from being willing or unwitting participants in a settler colonial structure that is driven to eliminate Indigenous people. However, folding them into a generalized settler position through voluntaristic assumptions constrains our ability to understand how their racialized vulnerability and disposability supports a settler colonial project.

Wolfe’s second point is to argue that settler supremacy and white supremacy, while often being “privileges that are fused and mutually compounding in social life,”²⁴ are actually categorically distinct modalities of power. He turns to the examples of colonized Tibetans, West Papuans, Khoi-san, Kashmiris and others to demonstrate that the terms of their colonial dispossession have nothing to do with race. He writes, “Campaigning against White supremacism would not help these people. It would be more likely to delight their colonisers.”²⁵ In sum, one’s status as a settler is neither an effect of the will nor a condition of one’s racial supremacy. Being a settler is solely constituted by being structurally opposed to Indigenous peoples. Here, Wolfe misses the point while overstating his case. While white supremacy may not be a feature of the colonial dispossession of Tibetans, doesn’t a Chinese supremacy exercise *racial* dominance over Tibetans? The example of the Khoisan is even more peculiar. It is not clear how this Indigenous population in South Africa is not shaped by the vestiges of apartheid and enduring structures of white supremacy given that their land and water were dispossessed by European settlers in what is now Cape Town.²⁶ Moreover, in Wolfe’s assertion that “the primary motive [of settler colonialism] is not race . . . but access to territory,” such a claim effectively evacuates the proprietorial nature of whiteness, one that led W. E. B. Du Bois to define “Whiteness [as] the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen.”²⁷ Racial supremacy shifts over time and space—as do constructions of whiteness. Nevertheless, I propose that racial dynamics are internal rather than external to the logic of settler colonialism in North America.

AFRO-PESSIMISM AND THE TOTALITY

The paradigm of Afro-pessimism offers an interesting corollary to the Indigenous/settler binary discussed above. My discussion of this critical theory rests on the terms of its binary formulation and rejection of Indigenous sovereignty that have been advanced by Jared Sexton and Frank Wilderson, perhaps the most vocal proponents of this school of thought.²⁸

My goal here is to respond to their critique of Indigenous sovereignty by reframing the relation between colonialism and racial slavery and to challenge the antidialectical stance of Afro-pessimist critique. Although Afro-pessimism rejects Marxian political economic analysis,²⁹ it operationalizes a revised paradigm of economic determinism to install instead an antiblack base that generates a global racial superstructure.

Rather than reinscribe a black/white opposition, Afro-pessimism charts a black/nonblack binary that evolves out of the history of racial slavery. The reason for absorbing whiteness into a variable condition of nonblackness is to deemphasize white power and instead emphasize the singularity and paradigmatic status of racial blackness as the essential condition of enslavability. According to Sexton, white people are better termed “*all nonblacks* . . . because it is a racial blackness as a necessary condition for enslavement that matters most, rather than whiteness as a sufficient condition for freedom.”³⁰ In what Sexton terms an “unequally arrayed category of nonblackness,” Wilderson designates white subjects as the “senior partners” and other non-white, nonblack racialized subjects as the “junior partners of civil society.”³¹ The indelible, iterative structure of racial slavery is what animates our contemporary moment—what Sexton refers to as a future anterior—a mathematical terror that Saidiya Hartman grounds in the “racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago.”³² Rejecting the Indigenous/settler opposition put forward by Wolfe, Sexton states that the U.S.-born slave-descended population “suffers the status of being neither the native nor the foreigner, neither the colonizer nor the colonized.”³³ Thus blackness is both a lived impossibility and categorical exception. Wilderson further contends that black life is an evacuated historical category, a lived entity that is “*off the record*.”³⁴ Unlike Native Americans, whom he claims have recourse to historical modes of ontological embodiment—such that they exist “liminally as half-death and half-life between the Slave (black) and the Human (White or nonblack)” —black people are a categorical negation, part of “America’s structuring irrationality” that engenders the coherence and rationality of white life.³⁵

Wilderson and Sexton extend these arguments about the relationality of black and Indigenous ontologies of non- or half-life respectively to further interrogate the validity of Indigenous sovereignty movements. These arguments are taken from Wilderson’s articles and 2010 monograph *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, which are expanded upon in Sexton’s 2014 article, “The *Vel* of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign.” To begin then with Wilderson’s formulation, for him Indigeneity differs from antiblackness because Indigenous sovereignty struggles

engage in a politics of state recognition that is categorically unavailable to black subjects. More than this, Wilderson claims that Native sovereignty claims ultimately uphold rather than undermine white supremacy and the coherence of the U.S. nation-state. He writes, "White supremacy has made good use of the Indian subject's positionality: a positionality which fortifies and extends the interlocutory life of America as a coherent (albeit genocidal) idea, because treaties are forms of articulation, and discussions brokered between two groups presumed to possess the same kind of historical currency: sovereignty."³⁶ In their critical alliance, Wilderson and Sexton emphasize how "the dynamics of Negrophobia are animated . . . by a preoccupation with sovereignty."³⁷

The claim of Negrophobic Indigenous sovereignty is rooted in Wilderson's somewhat selective reading of Chris Eyre's 2002 feature film *Skins* about Native American vigilantism and alcoholism. Here he argues that the Native American protagonist Rudy Yellow Lodge's preoccupation with spirituality and sovereignty animates his Negrophobia. Wilderson's rationale for this interpretation is that Rudy has the capacity to be aligned with a politics of genocide rather than sovereignty, the latter of which forecloses a shared antagonism with black existence. Such an emphasis on sovereignty therefore represents a "de-escalation of antagonism to the level of conflict."³⁸ In particular, Wilderson links Rudy's investment in sovereignty to his anger at two Native teens for "acting 'Black' . . . their grunting voices and aggressive body language [indicating] that they are talking 'Black.'"³⁹ Because the teens get into a fight with one another, Wilderson registers Rudy's "sovereign" rejection of the corrosive effects of blackness. The teens' mimicry of blackness is presented as the *cause* of their fight: "Rap lyrics, dialect, and Black male body language have pulled these two young men into a pit of absolute dereliction and cultural abandonment," which leads Wilderson to conclude that "Blackness is at the heart of Native American autogenocide."⁴⁰ As a result, as Sexton elaborates, Indigenous sovereignty can only mobilize a politics of "resurgence or recovery [that] is bound to regard the slave as 'the position of the unthought.'"⁴¹ Slavery is incompatible with the presumptions of sovereign recuperation of and governance over land, identity, and cultures, because slavery "is not a loss that the self experiences . . . but rather the loss of any self that could experience such loss."⁴² These points form the basic architecture for Sexton's ultimate claim that sovereignty should be jettisoned in favor of the more radical antagonistic project of abolition.

To begin digesting these claims, one finds a certain contradiction in the empirical relation of Indigeneity and blackness that Wilderson and Sexton present. Wilderson's suggestion that a shared genocidal antagonism would

potentially form a correspondence between Indigeneity and antiblackness is somewhat at odds with Sexton's claim that racial slavery subsumes all other modalities of power. It is only through our realization of the exceptionality of antiblackness, Sexton writes, that "might help not only to break down false dichotomies, and perhaps pose a truer one, but also to reveal the ways that the study of slavery is already and of necessity the study of capitalism, colonialism, and settler colonialism, among other things."⁴³ Here I interpret Sexton's rejection of a Native/settler opposition as among the "false dichotomies" that should be dispensed with in order to install a black/nonblack "truer" dichotomy. However, and this is my point, Wilderson's and Sexton's divergent emphases put the empirical status of Indigeneity in flux. On the one hand, Indigenous sovereignty is conceptualized primarily as a screen: an "obscene supplement" of the settler nation-state,⁴⁴ an anti-black expression of false consciousness, or a lost opportunity to apply the motif of genocide and share in an antagonism that relates to black social death. That is, the claim that sovereignty "de-escalates" a genocidal antagonism to "conflict" suggests that a more authentic truth of Indigeneity is genocide, which means that the unrealized fact of Indigeneity is its empirical analogy to black social death. But on the other hand, Sexton forcefully rejects any claim to an empirically based analogy, claiming that antiblackness trumps Indigeneity just as racial slavery trumps settler colonialism. And so the potential relations that Wilderson sets up through a critique of sovereignty are at best irrelevant or at worse false in Sexton's absolute claim that slavery stands alone as the "threshold of the political world."⁴⁵ I suggest that this wavering relation/nonrelation of antiblackness and Indigeneity exhibited in Wilderson's and Sexton's work reveal the problem in any totalizing approach to the heterogeneous constitution of racial difference in settler colonies.

Beyond this inconsistency, the liberal multiculturalist agenda that Wilderson and Sexton project into Indigenous sovereignty willfully evacuates any Indigenous *refusal* of a colonial politics of recognition. Among other broad strokes, Sexton states, "as a rule, Native Studies reproduces the dominant liberal political narrative of emancipation and enfranchisement."⁴⁶ This provides a basis for Wilderson's assertion that Indigenous sovereignty engages in a liberal politics of state legitimation through recognition because "treaties are forms of articulation" that buttress "the interlocutory life of America as a coherent (albeit genocidal) idea."⁴⁷ But such a depoliticized liberal project is frankly incompatible with Indigenous activism and scholarship that emerges from Native studies in North America. The main

argument in Glen Sean Coulthard's book *Red Skin, White Masks* is to categorically reject "the liberal recognition-based approach to Indigenous self-determination."⁴⁸ This is not a politics of legitimizing Indigenous nations through state recognition but rather one of refusal, a refusal to be recognized and thus interpellated by the settler colonial nation-state. Drawing on Fanon, Coulthard describes the "necessity on the part of the oppressed to 'turn away' from their other-oriented master-dependency, and to instead struggle for freedom on their own terms and in accordance with their own values."⁴⁹ It is also difficult to reconcile the depoliticized narrative of "resurgence and recovery" that Wilderson and Sexton attribute to Indigenous sovereignty in the face of Idle No More, the anticapitalist Indigenous sovereignty movement in Canada whose national railway and highway blockades have seriously destabilized the expropriation of natural resources for the global market. These are examples that Coulthard describes as "direct action" rather than negotiation—in other words, *antagonism*, not conflict resolution:

They [blockades] are a crucial act of negation insofar as they seek to impede or block the flow of resources currently being transported to international markets from oil and gas fields, refineries, lumber mills, mining operations, and hydroelectric facilities located on the dispossessed lands of Indigenous nations. These modes of direct action . . . seek to have a negative impact on the economic infrastructure that is core to the colonial accumulation of capital in settler-political economies like Canada's.⁵⁰

These tactics are part of what Audra Simpson calls a "cartography of refusal" that "negates the authority of the other's gaze."⁵¹ It is impossible to frame the blockade movement, which has become the greatest threat to Canada's resource agenda,⁵² as a struggle for "enfranchisement." Idle No More is not in "conflict" with the Canadian nation-state; it is in a struggle against the very premise of settler colonial capitalism that requires the elimination of Indigenous peoples. As Coulthard states unambiguously, "For Indigenous nations to live, capitalism must die."⁵³

But perhaps my own defense of Indigenous decolonization movements for sovereignty begs a larger question about whether sovereignty in itself offers a radical politics that can encompass or mobilize a black radical tradition rooted in the project of abolition. And it is here that I agree with Sexton's intervention to problematize the idea that antiracist agendas must emerge from the foundational priority of Indigenous sovereignty and restoration of land.⁵⁴ But against the totalizing frame of Afro-pessimism, I want to stress

instead the pitfalls of any antidialectical approach to the political economy of the settler colonial racial state from the position of *either* Indigenous or antiblack exceptionalism. Settler colonial racial capitalism is not a thing but a social relation. As such, it is not produced out of the *causal* relationships that Sexton puts forward here: “Slavery, as it were, precedes and prepares the way for colonialism, its forebear or fundament or support. Colonialism, as it were, the issue or heir of slavery, its outgrowth or edifice or monument.”⁵⁵ The nearly totalizing black existential frame is similarly based on a questionable construction of epistemic privilege:

[black existence] does relate to the totality; it indicates the (repressed) truth of the political and economic system. That is to say, the whole range of positions within the racial formation is most fully understood from this vantage point, not unlike the way in which the range of gender and sexual variance under patriarchal and heteronormative regimes is most fully understood through lenses that are feminist and queer.⁵⁶

According to Sexton, no other oppression is reducible to antiblackness, but the relative totality of antiblackness is the privileged perspective from which to understand racial formation more broadly. But unlike the way feminist and queer critical theory interrogate heteropatriarchy from a subjectless standpoint, Sexton’s entire point seems to rest on the very specificity and singularity—rather than subjectlessness—of black critical theory’s capacity to understand race. The privilege of this embodied viewpoint similarly relies on rigidly binaristic conceptions of land and bodily integrity. He writes, “If the indigenous relation to land precedes and exceeds any regime of property, then the slave’s inhabitation of the earth precedes and exceeds any prior relation to land—landlessness. And selflessness is the correlate. No ground for identity, no ground to stand (on).”⁵⁷ In other words, the slave’s nonrelation to her body precedes and exceeds any other body’s relation to land. However, the settler colonial designation of the United States and Canada as *terra nullius*—as legally empty lands—denies the very corporeality of Indigenous populations to inhabit land, much less have any rights to it. Alongside genocidal elimination, the erasure of Indigenous corporeal existence is inseparable from the ground it doesn’t stand on, or is removed from.

For the same reason that the economic reductionism of orthodox Marxism has been discredited, such an argument that frames racial slavery as a base for a colonial superstructure similarly fails to take into account the dialectics of settler colonial capitalism. The political economy of settler

colonial capitalism is more appropriately figured as an ecology of power relations than a linear chain of events. Relinquishing any conceptual privilege that might be attributed to Indigeneity, alternatively, Coulthard offers a useful anti-exceptionalist stance: “the colonial relation should not be understood as a primary locus of ‘base’ from which these other forms of oppression flow, but rather as the inherited background field within which market, racist, patriarchal, and state relations *converge*.”⁵⁸ From this view, race and colonialism form the matrix of the settler colonial racial state.

Putting colonial land and enslaved labor at the center of a dialectical analysis, we can see that blackness is neither reducible to Indigenous land nor Indigeneity to enslaved labor. Indigenous peoples and slaves are not reducible to each other because settler colonialism abides by a dual logic that is originally driven to eliminate Native peoples from land and mix the land with enslaved black labor. If land is the basis of settler colonialists’ relationship to Indigenous peoples, it is labor that frames that relationship with enslaved peoples. We can draw on Patrick Wolfe’s important points about the heterogeneous racial effects of such a settler formation based on Indigenous land and enslaved labor. To summarize those points, the *racial* content of Indigenous peoples is the mirror opposite of blackness. From the beginning, an eliminatory project was driven to reduce Native populations through genocidal wars and later through statistical elimination through blood quantum and assimilationist policies. For slaves, an opposite logic of exclusion was driven to *increase*, not eliminate, the population of slaves. One logic does not cause the other; rather, they work together to serve a unitary end in increasing white settler property in the form of land and an enslaved labor force. As a result, in the postemancipation, postfrontier era, the racial content of Indigenous peoples is entirely dissolvable and eradicable. Alternatively, the racial content of blackness remains absolute and essential, and maintains an infinite capacity to contaminate. As Wolfe states, “the respective racializations . . . were diametrically opposed, in a manner that reflected and preserved the foundational distinction between land and labor. For whereas race for black people became an indelible trait that would survive any amount of admixture, race for Indians became an inherently descending quantity that was terminally susceptible to dilution.”⁵⁹ One consequence is that the phrase “separate but equal” can take two meanings: as either an injurious legal relic or a sovereign politics of the future.⁶⁰ Given this stark distinction in racial ontologies, any critical theory that views race and colonialism as a causal rather than dialectical relation is incapable of exposing these inextricable logics of settler colonialism.

PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION AND ITS IRRATIONALITY

In order to recuperate the frame of political economy, a focus on the dialectic of racial slavery and settler colonialism leads to important revisions of Karl Marx's theory of primitive accumulation. In particular, Marx designates the transition from feudal to capitalist social relations as a violent process of primitive accumulation whereby "conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, play the greatest part."⁶¹ For Marx, this results in the expropriation of the worker, the proletariat, who becomes the privileged subject of capitalist revolution. If we consider primitive accumulation as a persistent structure rather than event, both Afro-pessimism and settler colonial studies destabilize normative conceptions of capitalism through the conceptual displacements of the proletariat. As Coulthard demonstrates, in considering Indigenous peoples in relation to primitive accumulation, "it appears that the history and experience of *dispossession*, not proletarianization, has been the dominant background structure shaping the character of the historical relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state."⁶² It is thus dispossession of land through genocidal elimination, relocation, and theft that animates Indigenous resistance and anticapitalism and "less around our emergent status as 'rightless proletarians.'"⁶³ If we extend the frame of primitive accumulation to the question of slavery, it is the dispossession of the slave's body rather than the proletarianization of labor that both precedes and exceeds the frame of settler colonial and global modernity.

On this point Afro-pessimism offers a unique and incisive formulation of black labor. Dispensing with a view that slavery was a labor system—including Andrea Smith's assessment that "African Americans have been traditionally *valued* for their labor"⁶⁴—Sexton and Wilderson decouple slavery from a normative conception of labor. The slave, in their estimation, is a figure of anti-labor who calls into question the very legitimacy of productive work.⁶⁵ Rather than a labor system, slavery represented foremost a capitalist property system that was kick-started by the "'accumulation' of black bodies regardless of their utility as laborers."⁶⁶ Thus the slave cannot be thought of as a worker, because the "slave makes a demand which is in excess of the demand made by the worker."⁶⁷ That is to say, while the worker demands fairness and improved labor conditions the slave demands that all production cease regardless of its democratization because "work is not an organic principle for the slave."⁶⁸ This argument is fueled by Wilderson's and Sexton's general critique of Marxism, whose central tenets fall apart,

they argue, in the presence of the black body. Here I quote Wilderson's delineation of the unrecognized but generative condition of blackness for initiating capitalist modernity and later resolving crises of capitalism:

The absence of black subjectivity from the crux of Marxist discourse is symptomatic of the discourse's inability to cope with the possibility that the generative subject of capitalism, the black body of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the generative subject that resolves late-capital's over-accumulation crisis, the black (incarcerated) body of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, do not reify the basic categories which structure Marxist conflict: the categories of work, production, exploitation, historical self-awareness, and above all, hegemony.⁶⁹

Because antiblackness is a terror formation rather than a hegemonic one, overthrowing capitalism cannot guarantee emancipation. There are no demands that the exploited worker can put forward that can satisfy or solve the experience of black social death, which prohibits the slave from entering into a transaction of value. Moreover, Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton dispel the assumption that "if racism can be made not useful to the relations of production or the security of territorial boundaries, it will fade away from the social landscape like the proverbial withering away of the state."⁷⁰ In their estimation, the precarity and irrationality of blackness operate outside the normative and rational circuits of capitalism. Carrying this logic forward into the neoliberal age, as Tamara Nopper clarifies, "as workers, African Americans are treated as possessing no productive value and contributing to no economy or nation."⁷¹ The social death of the black body is thus an irrational and despotic foundation on which the structuring rationality of American civil society and capitalism are based and enabled.

While I question the notion that slavery does not function as a labor system, Wilderson makes an important point that the slave exceeds a normative Marxian conception of the productive worker. Adding to the black subject's exclusion from this category of worker, I would argue that Indigenous peoples in settler colonies are similarly constituted outside of a hegemonic labor paradigm. To support this, we can turn to Wilderson's own example of the Khoisan of South Africa. He argues that when European anthropologists encountered the Khoisan they were deemed "without character" because they did not work.⁷² This perceived idleness was therefore grounds for their annihilation. As Wilderson recounts, this idleness had been "a) counterposed to work and b) criminalized and designated with

the status of sin.”⁷³ While the Khoisan animate the larger incoherence of a global antiblackness, they are also an Indigenous population subject to the eliminatory logics of settler colonialism. In many ways, their experience parallels that of Native Americans, whose lands were dispossessed on the basis of their presumed failure to work; that is, their so-called failure to cultivate land or enclose it. This colonial logic was derived from John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*, which argued that Indigenous peoples had “no inherent right to property in land and that only appropriation through labor provided the rights of ownership.”⁷⁴ A colonial construction of work (or absence of) was thus the justification for British settlers to claim property rights through agricultural labor and enclosed settlement. These points relate to an overall logic of settler colonialism that Wolfe lays out, insofar as “settler colonialism seeks to *replace the native* on their land rather than extract surplus value by mixing their labor with a colony’s natural resources.”⁷⁵ The racial logic that evacuates the humanity of the Khoisan works in tandem with a settler colonial logic driven to replace Indigenous peoples by eliminating them—rather than by exploiting their labor. For Indigenous populations in North America, moreover, there are similarly no demands that the exploited worker can put forward to solve the experience of Indigenous elimination and dispossession. The Indigenous body’s metaphoric distance from labor also stands as an irrational outside to settler colonial political economy. This opens up a view of how the internal dialectics of the racial state shape and distort the view of social labor, revealing irrationalities that exceed normative circuits of capitalism.

Expanding the scope beyond a black/Indigenous frame, we can explore how other groups have been subject to or have expressed different forms of economic irrationality in the context of settler colonialism. For example, since the nineteenth century, the content of Asian racialization has often turned on an *excessive* efficiency responsible for the destruction of normative proletariat labor. Here too the Asian laborer’s negative relation to the extraction of surplus value frustrates a presumption of capitalism’s rationality. In the nineteenth-century context of Chinese railroad building in North America, the connection between the Chinese and the abstract domination of capitalism evolved through their identification with a mode of efficiency that was aligned with a perverse temporality of domestic and social reproduction. In many ways, the Chinese became the personification of Marx’s formulation of “abstract labor.” Here abstract labor, which represents a social average of labor time to produce a use-value in order to express its quantitative value during exchange, is set into opposition with concrete labor,

the actual time and place of a specific laboring activity that expresses its qualitative use-value. Through the symbolic alignment of Chinese bodies with perverse forms of accelerated temporality, their human labor was rendered disembodied, abstract. White bodies, on the other hand, were symbolically associated with concrete labor, which establishes a commodity's quality. In other words, the Chinese personified the quantitative sphere of abstract labor, which threatened the concrete, qualitative sphere of white labor's social reproduction.

Whiteness, too, has distorted its relation to capitalist modernity at key moments in history by invoking an ideology of romantic anticapitalism. Enduring features of Romanticism, the aesthetic movement that emerged in the nineteenth century, exhibit such a biologized worldview in its human (and often racial and national) identification with the purity of the natural world, portrayed as the valorized antithesis to the negative influences of urbanization and industrialization. From the antimaterialism expressed in Henry David Thoreau's excursion to Walden Pond in the nineteenth century to Christopher McCandless's 1992 divestment of all symbols of material wealth—even setting fire to his remaining cash—for a life in the wilderness, we can discern a romantic attachment to a pure and revitalizing construction of nature, in contrast to the alienation attributed to capitalist modernity. Nature therefore personifies concrete, perfected human relations against the social degeneration caused by the abstract circuits of capitalism. This is a mode of white settler identification that Shari M. Huhndorf calls “going Native,” which functions to cover over colonial invasion and reimagine a natural affiliation to the land.⁷⁶ Within this ideology of settler colonial belonging, who else but the Native, whose alignment with a state of nature is perceived to be wholly removed from the sphere of capitalism, represents the idealized figure of this symbolic pursuit? Who else but the enslaved black subject remains as the reviled antithesis of that anticapitalism, as the originary object of modernity? The purpose of these brief examples is to suggest that an ongoing settler colonial structure of primitive accumulation and ideology of romantic anticapitalism require that we imagine far different demands than those that emerge from Marx's beleaguered proletariat.

By way of conclusion, I want to question the impetus for an Afro-pessimist or any other attempt to dismantle the validity of settler colonial critique by recourse to the issue of Native sovereignty.⁷⁷ While my argument in this essay has been to problematize the notion that settler colonial racial capitalism is a zero sum game, I think it is also important to acknowledge a longer institutional context that has historically sidelined Indigenous cultural politics

in order to prioritize systems of oppression that target other gendered and racialized populations. Indeed, Indigenous struggles have often exceeded the dominant conceptual paradigms of U.S. ethnic studies anchored by race, citizenship, war and labor migration, and transnationalism and diaspora, to name only a few. Despite the crucial importance of these frameworks in the institutional history of ethnic studies, they have tended to relegate Indigeneity rather than blackness to the “position of the unthought.” My hope is that a *critical* ethnic studies frame will enable a durable Native American critical existence in relation to the totality. Being, not nothingness.

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NOTES

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1. Jared Sexton, “People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery,” *Social Text* 28, no. 2 (2010): 48.

2. Patrick Wolfe, “Recuperating Binarism: A Heretical Introduction,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 3, nos. 3–4 (2013): 257, 258.

3. Frank B. Wilderson III, “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society,” *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003): 238.

4. Jared Sexton, “The *Vel* of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign,” *Critical Sociology* (December 2014): 2.

5. See, for example, Laura Pulido and David Lloyd, “In the Long Shadow of the Settler: On Israeli and U.S. Colonialisms,” *American Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (2010); Rosaura Sánchez and Beatrice Pita, “Rethinking Settler Colonialism,” *American Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2014); Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura, eds., *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai’i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008).

6. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 45.

7. Bill V. Mullen, “Global Intifada,” *Counterpunch*, November 27, 2012, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/11/27/global-intifada/>.

8. Fujikane and Okamura, *Asian Settler Colonialism*.

9. Dean Saranillio, “Why Asian Settler Colonialism Matters,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, nos. 3–4 (2013): 286.

10. Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassell, 1999), 2.

11. There is a long list of present-day (non-post) colonies, dependent, trust and unincorporated territories, overseas departments, and other colonial entities that include British Gibraltar, the Falklands/Malvinas; Danish Greenland; Dutch Antilles; French Guiana, Martinique, Réunion, St. Pierre, and Miquelon; U.S. Puerto Rico, Samoa, and Virgin Islands; Spanish Ceuta, Melilla, and the Canary Islands. See Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 3.

12. Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism,'" *Social Text*, no. 31–32 (1992): 84–98.

13. Patrick Wolfe, "Land, Labor, and Difference: Elementary Structures of Race," *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (2001): 866–905.

14. Werner Biermann and Reinhart Kössler, "The Settler Mode of Production: The Rhodesian Case," *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 18 (May–August 1980): 115.

15. Young, *Postcolonialism*, 20.

16. Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.

17. Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xix.

18. Wolfe, "Recuperating Binarism," 257.

19. *Ibid.*, 259, 257.

20. *Ibid.*, 257.

21. *Ibid.*, 263.

22. *Ibid.* (emphasis mine).

23. Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *Intensions Journal*, no. 5 (Fall/Winter 2011): 18.

24. Wolfe, "Recuperating Binarism," 264.

25. *Ibid.*

26. See Mohamed Adhikari, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005).

27. Patrick Wolfe, "Settler-Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Studies* 8, no. 4 (2006): 388; W. E. B. Du Bois, quoted in Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2.

28. Scholars referenced in connection to Afro-pessimism include Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, David Marriott, Franz Fanon, and Orlando Patterson. See Fred Moten's engagement with black optimism and pessimism in "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 737–81.

29. See Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx."

30. Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness," 36.

31. Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 38.

32. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 7, quoted in Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," 19.

33. Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness," 41.
34. Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx," 236.
35. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 23, 231. For the first category, Rights or Entitlements, Wilderson notes that "here even Native Americans provide categories for the record when one thinks of how the Iroquois constitution, for example, becomes the American constitution." The second category is Sovereignty, which inheres in those people, including Native Americans, whose sovereignty was "taken by force and dint of broken treaties" and which can have a future history insofar as numerous Native American tribes have submitted applications for federal recognition. The third is Immigration, whereby "contestations over the legitimacy of arrival, immigration, or of sovereignty" is a category of subjecthood for either white or racialized migrants. But the African American does not generate historical categories, according to Wilderson, hence the anomalous nonbeing of black exception.
36. Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx," 236.
37. Sexton, "The *Vel* of Slavery," 10
38. Ibid.
39. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 227.
40. Ibid., 227, 228. Wilderson acknowledges that "someone watching this scene in a theater would have comprehended none of this." Ibid., 227.
41. Sexton, "The *Vel* of Slavery," 9, quoting Wilderson and Hartman.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 11.
44. Slavoj Žižek adapts Jacques Derrida's notion of the supplement as something that, in giving coherence to the dominant term in a binary, subverts the logic of that binary. For Žižek, the obscene supplement *reinforces* rather than destabilizes the political system. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 1997), 28–51.
45. Sexton, "The *Vel* of Slavery," 11.
46. Ibid., 12n10.
47. Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx," 236, quoted in Sexton, "The *Vel* of Slavery," 10.
48. Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 23.
49. Ibid., 43.
50. Ibid., 170.
51. Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014), 33, 24.
52. Martin Lukacs and Shiri Pasternak, "Aboriginal Rights a Threat to Canada's Resource Agenda," *The Guardian*, March 14, 2014.
53. Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 173.
54. Sexton, "The *Vel* of Slavery," 5.
55. Ibid., 11.
56. Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness," 48.
57. Sexton, "The *Vel* of Slavery," 11.
58. Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 14.

59. Wolfe, "Land, Labor, and Difference," 887.
60. I am thinking in particular of Indigenous mobilizing in Canada around the "White Paper," which would have terminated Indigenous populations' special status.
61. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 874.
62. Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 13.
63. Ibid.
64. Andrea Smith, "Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing," in *The Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology*, ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Boston: South End Press, 2006), 71 (emphasis mine).
65. See Tamara Nopper, "The Wages of Non-blackness: Contemporary Immigrant Rights and Discourses of Character, Productivity, and Value," *InTensions Journal*, no. 5 (2011): 1–25.
66. Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx," 229.
67. Ibid., 230.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid.
70. Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton, "The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy," *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003): 178.
71. Nopper, "The Wages of Non-blackness," 19.
72. Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx," 234.
73. Ibid., 235.
74. Alyosha Goldstein, "Where the Nation Takes Place: Proprietary Regimes, Antistatism, and U.S. Settler Colonialism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 4 (2008): 839.
75. Wolfe, "Land, Labor, and Difference," 868 (emphasis mine). See also Coulthard's more local examples of Native labor in the Canadian context in *Red Skin, White Masks*.
76. Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001).
77. See the discussion of critiques of Asian settler colonialism in Saranillio, "Why Asian Settler Colonialism Matters."